Vertical and Horizontal Peace Gaps: 
Local Peacebuilding Between Fear and Fatigue in Israel and Palestine

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To be presented at the 2012 Swedish National Peace and Conflict Conference, Gothenburg, 14-15 June 2012

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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000 and the breakdown of the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) several peacebuilding activities between Israelis and Palestinians have either collapsed or are struggling for survival. They operate in what may be described as a harsh “psycho-political environment” (Pundak, 2012), characterised by collective fears, peace fatigue and indifference to the conflict. During the 1990s, many peace organisations enjoyed generous international funding but since the second intifada donors withdrew large parts of their support and consequently “the peace industry” collapsed. In many ways, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems to be more intractable than ever despite nearly ten years of an official peace process.

The overarching ambition in this paper is to explore the peace gaps and the interplay that exist between the elite and local levels. A peace gap can be understood as the discrepancy between real and imagined peace and may exist on different levels within conflict societies (Aggestam & Björkdahl, 2011; MacGinty 2006: 82). The ones that we are exploring exist in relationships between peace talks on elite levels and peace initiatives, which stem from below in the form of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Even though the MEPP is deadlocked, several peace NGOs are operating on the local levels. Their activities are both constrained and enabled by the peacemaking (or lack of) at the elite levels as well as the public understandings and support of various peacebuilding efforts. This implies substantial gaps between NGOs, the elites and domestic publics respectively, which may be assessed both vertically and horizontally.

The paper has a two-fold aim. First, we explore vertical peace gaps by highlighting four gaps which are relevant for peacebuilding practices: (1) The expectation gap refers to the kind of peace that is desired; (2) the communication gap focuses on the inclusion/exclusion in terms of which groups are included in the peace process; (3) the identification gap addresses ideas about co-existence/difference, and finally; (4) the power gap dissects the implications of the asymmetric dynamics of conflict. The second part of the paper addresses the enabling and constraining effects of the vertical peace gaps on local peacebuilding. Here we assess horizontal peace gaps by highlighting expectation (contents of practices), communication (outreach and influence), identification (peace formula), and power (asymmetrical relations)
in the peacebuilding practices on the local level. These four factors refer back to the abovementioned gaps on expectation, communication, identification and power.

Much of previous research on peacebuilding has been policy-oriented and inclined to focus on technical and institutional arrangements with little or no emphasis on creating legitimacy for peace locally. Local perspectives are frequently viewed as obstacles, which need to be overcome rather than as constituencies in which peace should be anchored (Donais, 2009:3, Chesterman, 2007). This has led to an intense debate about local ownership, which is concerned with if and how local actors have the possibility to influence the peace process so that their perceived needs are met in the creation of peace (Höglund and Fjelde, 2011:20-21).

The growing critique against liberal peacebuilding has triggered a “critical turn” in which scholars have worked to enhance understanding of the local level in relation to peacebuilding (Richmond 2009; Richmond 2010; Mac Ginty 2011). This research turns away from a state-centric elite-focus and is more apt to capture a comprehensive view of peacebuilding efforts where the local level plays a significant part (Pickering, 2006). Peacebuilding is thus presently under intense critical scrutiny where key questions are posed about what kind of peace should be promoted and who is included and excluded in different peace processes. Peacebuilding has therefore come to a crossroads, which requires critical re-evaluation in both theory and practice (Aggestam & Björkdahl, 2012; Paris 2010).

Yet, we argue that there is a tendency to overlook the relationship between local agency and wider societal structures, which risks ending up with an idealised notion of the potential of the local level to bring about peace. This study aims to move beyond this idealisation as it assesses local peacebuilding as well as local ownership and addresses the interplay between local and elite levels. Hence, we are interested in the opportunities to communicate ideas of peace vertically, including both grassroots and the elites, as well as in horizontal communication, which entails possibilities for cooperation with other constituencies on the local level (Kaufman et al., 2006:4).

For the empirical analysis, we have relied primarily on material from recently conducted interviews with peacebuilding actors in Israel and Palestine. The interviews were semi-structured interviews and focused on the interplay and politics between the elite level of peacemaking and current local peacebuilding efforts. Besides interview material, we also draw on data from several reports, Israeli and Palestinian opinion polls as well as secondary sources.

**Which peace, whose peace? Identifying vertical peace gaps**

*The problem of liberal peacebuilding*

Peacebuilding includes an ambitious peace agenda, which stretches beyond negative peace and serves as an umbrella for a whole range of economic, judicial, political, social and cultural activities from the local to the global levels. Liberal peacebuilding has also become the favoured top-down response and panacea to contemporary conflicts by the international community. It promotes democratisation, market based economic reforms, rule of law, protection of human rights and other institutions associated with modern states as the driving force for building peace. As such, the liberal democratic peace is perceived as superior to alternative understandings of peace (Mac Ginty, 2006). The overarching *problematique*
concerns to what extent peacebuilding efforts have the ability to contribute to comprehensive change towards peace? Few efforts have been made to assess the appropriateness of the idea of liberal peace to existing local realities. Consequently, peacebuilding has become in many ways a depoliticised and technical practice, which is reflected in the lack of popular participation and support (Cousens and Kumar 2001).

The Middle East peace process has from the start been framed according to the notion of a liberal peace with economic cooperation and prosperity in sight despite the fact that the occupation is still in place. Consequently, there has been a great influx of international actors and donors after the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP). The political regime and institutional structures of the Palestinian Authority (PA) have primarily been conditioned by the agreements between the PLO and Israel, which do not reflect the internal Palestinian political dynamics (Jamal, 2005: 166). Hence, the liberal peace agenda that guided the peace process has generated a virtual and aid-dependent Palestinian entity that lacks any contiguous territory and suffers from growing internal and violent division between Palestinians. Also funding to local NGOs has exacerbated tensions in the Palestinian society since donors have been inclined to fund according to political affiliation (primarily Fatah-affiliated organisations). Also donors have influenced (and at times distorted) local institutional developments so that they fit according to the development priorities of the donors (Brynen, 2008:236). Such developments on the ground has consolidated a status quo situation and paradoxically made the realisation of a two-state-solution more remote.

With the failure of the Camp David in 2000 and with the eruption of the second intifada public opinion towards peace changed dramatically (Levy, 2012). While Israelis viewed the peace process with great suspicion sixty percentages still supported a negotiated agreement although not within the framework of the MEPP (Peace Index, July 2001). At the same time, a majority of Palestinians were still supporting a return to negotiations but at the same time a majority (seventy percentages) believed that armed confrontations had so far achieved Palestinian rights in ways that the negotiations had not.

The problem with inclusion/exclusion

There are many levels and actors in a peace process. Processes of peacemaking work mainly on the elite and official levels to halt violence and to move parties toward peaceful solutions (Miall et al., 1999, Dayton and Kriesberg, 2010). To build inclusive peace processes that reach beyond elite levels into civil society, peacemaking must be complimented by processes on other levels of society. In this regard peacebuilding, if related to local constituencies, can serve to anchor peaceful attitudes in society and lay ground for future coexistence. It aims to transform warlike behaviours of societies and under ideal conditions it serves to prevent relapse into violence (Bercovitch and Kadayifci, 2002, Maoz, 2004:565). Locally anchored peacebuilding is more than just reconstruction after conflict – it entails a full array of processes which at different stages are needed in order to transform conflict toward sustainable and peaceful relationships (Lederach, 1997). Thus, peacebuilding can take place before, during and after formal peace treaties are signed and are needed to be long-term if former destructive dynamics are to be replaced with constructive ones (Kriesberg, 2007). Under the best of conditions, efforts at peacemaking and peacebuilding support and sustain each other (Maoz, 2004). However, oftentimes when peace processes enter limbo we can
observe that peacebuilding work on local levels are still prevailing, even though elite peacemaking seems to have reached a dead end.

In Israel and Palestine today, the only ones who seem to work relentlessly for peace are local and international NGOs, which are active mainly on the grassroots level. Their marginal impact together with the deadlock of elite negotiations imply that a negative peace is upheld, whereas prospects for a positive peace seem to be far-reaching (Hallward, 2011:189). This is quite a pessimistic outlook for local peacebuilding efforts. However, it can be claimed that a minimal sense of peacebuilding must be upheld, even though a peace process might be at hold. This way, constituencies for peace on the local level might be sustained. These organisations and their work also function as safe-havens for believers in peace – and create a sheltered place where peace activists can meet, share ideas and support each other. And the day when peace-talks spark off again, these might serve as worked-in infrastructures for cooperation and dialogue on local levels, which can be utilised in shaping politics of reconciliation. Thus, small islands of peace can be created, contributing to a sense of peacefulness even though there at the moment is a general atmosphere of violence. These activities on a small scale can also prevent escalation of violence and dehumanisation by upholding some constructive relations between the parties to conflict (Hallward, 2011:572). In those situations, it is crucial to assess challenges to and possibilities for cooperation across the conflict's boundaries. Thus, we cannot only investigate into intra-societal cooperation, but in order to say something about future prospects for cooperation and peacebuilding we must also see if it is possible for organisations to have cooperation and dialogue across the boundaries, which have become inscribed between the conflict’s antagonists.

Even though peacebuilding might have minimal impact on the conflict during a breakdown of negotiations, they can still vary in influence. This is dependent on how well organisations are able to communicate with other organisations and agencies, and if they succeed in communicating their ideas to international as well as domestic media. Thus, many peacebuilding NGOs put much resources into activities such as advocacy, lobbying, and education toward differing target groups (Maoz, 2004:565, Kaufman et al., 2006:4) in order to disseminate their ideas to broader layers of society. Hence, we inquire into peace gaps which may or may not exist on three levels namely between peacebuilding organisations and the elites, with other peacebuilding organisations, and finally between organisations and civil society. Investigating these gaps we may discern the possibilities to create broader coalitions for peace.

The problem with difference

A challenging question, pertinent to all peace processes, is how to deal with co-existence and relationships between conflicting parties, both during peace talks as well as the time period following peace agreements. Should a peace be built on separation, like the one in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where former conflicting parties are separated to govern themselves in autonomous areas, or should a future peace mean coexistence within the same shared territory?

The problem of how collectives in conflict should deal with difference, or the other party to conflict, is not self-evident. Historically we can discern different tendencies and attitudes toward co-existence both among Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Far back, even before the
creation of the State of Israel, up until today, small activist groups within Israel have been criticising the Zionist endeavour for being based on exclusionist ideals and thus colliding with norms of equality (Avner, 1968). Advocates of these thoughts have pleaded for a state of Israel as a democratic state for all its citizens and today favour an incorporation of the West Bank and Gaza with its present inhabitants in that democracy (Tilley, 2005, Morris, 2009, Benvenisti, 2003, Zreik, 2011). This debate has been marginal in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the idea of a two-state solution has been promoted as a solution to the conflict ever since the UN resolution 242 in 1967 (which was built on the principle of land in exchange for peace). For a long time the two-state solution was considered “the only game in town” (Allegra and Napoletano, 2011:262). However, since facts on the ground have shifted with ever-expanding settlements on the West Bank, the two-state solution is becoming more difficult to imagine in practice. Therefore the idea of a binational state, even though highly unpopular by a majority of both Israelis and Palestinians, has again resurfaced. The two-state and one-state solutions respectively offer different practical solutions and build on quite different ideals when it comes to identity, as well as relating back to different historical experiences.

The idea of the two-state solution is mainly preoccupied with the consequences of the war of 1967. Thus, the major aim is to reverse the occupation and return to the status quo before 1967. Palestinian experiences of powerlessness and expulsions stemming from the inception of the Israeli state in 1948 are thus invisible in the two-state formula. The existence of legitimate Palestinian claims to occupied lands is recognised in the two-state solution, whereas other profound identity aspects of the Palestinian collective, foremost the historical consciousness of the Naqba, are not. This solution, based on separation, enhances ethnocentrism on both sides and is strongly affiliated with particularistic ideas of nationalism (Strömbom, 2010).

The one-state solution is normatively problematic for both Israelis and Palestinians. On the one hand, the idea of co-existence on all lands indicates recognition of deeply held identity aspects of the Palestinian counterpart. However, many Palestinian politicians find it problematic with coexistence, because it actually involves recognising Jewish existence on what is seen as traditionally Palestinian land. The one-state solution is also very controversial in Israeli context. This has mainly to do with constant historical focus on insecurity, where security has been equated with separation from Palestinian population. For many Israeli Jews, the one state solution is therefore connected to an acute feeling of future insecurity, as it would imply coexistence with the Palestinian population.

When assessing how different peacebuilding organisations in Israel and Palestine relate to the question of difference or coexistence there are several possible routes. One way is to investigate if the organisation mainly relates to the consequences of the 1948 war or the occupation in 1967. This is in turn often related to whether one would prefer a one-state- or a two-state solution and highlight gaps regarding identification. It indicates the expectations for the future, which has impact on the policies and strategies of the organisations. However, this division is far from clear-cut. Some would, regardless of national aspirations, still argue for the one-state solution for pragmatic reasons. That argument emphasises that the facts on the ground are so pervasive and seemingly irreversible that a two-state solution is impossible in practice, leaving us with no alternative than the one-state solution (Hershkowitz 2012)

*The problem with asymmetrical conflict*
Asymmetrical conflicts differ significantly from inter-state conflicts regarding the structure and the dynamics of conflict. The asymmetric power relations have consequences for peacebuilding, particularly related to questions about status, inclusion and the norms of peace negotiation. First, the asymmetrical nature of conflict tends to make unilateral actions enduring. Stronger parties enjoy state authority, legitimacy, sovereignty and institutionalised alliances, and hold economic, political and military power whereas weaker and rebellious groups most often lack these large-scale resources (Zartman, 1995: 10). Second, since asymmetrical conflicts often involve states as well as non-state actors, there is a legal asymmetry, which raises questions about status, recognition and valid leadership (King, 1997: 48). If the negotiations are framed among a wider public as elitist, exclusive and unjust, the negotiation process may be exposed to spoiling behaviour and thus jeopardise concession making (Aggestam, 2006). There is a growing recognition of the necessity to have most of the warring parties represented at the negotiation table (Hampson, 1996). Third, the "rules of the game" of peace negotiations are often not clearly delineated and the power asymmetry makes unilateral actions more probably as the stronger parties most often have other alternatives to a negotiating process. In the Middle East peace process, this has precisely been the case where various Palestinian groups constantly have complained that Israel, with support from the USA, dictates the principals and rules of engagement. After the failure of the Camp David summit in July 2000, the Palestinian side complained that the Israeli negotiators had not shown enough sincerity by refusing to establish shared basic parameters of a permanent status agreement. For the stronger party, incentives to compromise are lower since it often has what is called a strong Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA). For example, one of the major hurdles to overcome since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada is Israel's preferred strategy of unilateralism and disengagement from the Palestinians, such as the territorial withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and the military actions taken against the Hamas regime in 2007. Most Israeli governments have been inclined to view the Palestinian Authority not as a fully-fledged and reliable negotiating partner. The Israeli unilateral policies resulting in the subsequent creation of the wall from the early 2000s and onwards, with the transformation from temporary to permanent check-points between Israeli and Palestinian territory, has created a reality in which Palestinian areas in East Jerusalem as well as the West Bank have become increasingly detached from Israel and Israelis as well as from other parts where Palestinians reside (Yosef, 2011:43). Around 2009, after Operation Cast led when Israel invaded and put a siege on the Gaza Strip, there was a strong shift in Palestinian attitudes toward peace and most of the public held hard-line views with regards to returning to negotiations before Israel freezes construction in the settlements (PSR 2009). Obviously, Israel’s unilateral policy has created severe problems in relation to the perceived sincerity of Israeli peacemaking. Some even argues that the disengagement from the Gaza Strip has consolidated and strengthened occupation rather than eroding it, which was the official goal of the withdrawal (Roy, 2005). After the war in Gaza in 2009, Israelis were also reluctant go back to negotiations before Palestinians could ensure a cessation of violence and rocket-attacks (Truman institute summary 2009). At this time it was also clear that a majority of the Israeli public put the economic crisis (sixty-two percentages), security issues and the Iranian threat as the top three most important issues whereas only twenty percentages saw negotiations with the Palestinians as an important issue. The waning interest for the peace process can also be explained by the decreased physical contacts between Israelis and
Palestinians. Hence, it is a challenge for local peace NGOs to reach out to grass-roots levels. The wide-spread peace fatigue must be confronted, which may be the most vital task today when it comes to mobilising for peace (Pundak, 2012, Saragusti, 2012, Hershkowitz, 2012, Neiman, 2012).

Local Peacebuilding in Stormy Waters: Between Politics of Fear and Fatigue

In the empirical analysis below the implications of horizontal and vertical peace gaps between Israeli and Palestinian NGOs are assessed. More specifically it strives to highlight the context, diversity and meaning of peacebuilding practices as well as the opportunities and limitations of peace agents in their outreach, influence and communication. The analysis below is primarily based on in-depth interviews with various Israeli and Palestinian peace activists conducted during the spring of 2012, but include reports and books of Israeli and Palestinian peace NGOs (see for example, Salem & Kaufman, 2006; Kahanoff, et al, 2007).

Peacebuilding is as mentioned above an umbrella concept of a whole array of activities and practices. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it ranges from economic development, capacity building, education, interfaith dialogues, youth activities, sport, science, media, and cultural activities to environmental cooperation. In the analysis below, we make no claims to cover all these peacebuilding activities but strive to problematise and contextualise some of these practices. We have chosen to focus particularly on (a) advocacy and resistance, and (b) joint peace activities in order to expose various peace gaps when it comes to expectation, communication, identification and power, which peace NGOs are confronted with in their practices of peacebuilding.

Advocacy and resistance as peacebuilding

Numerous NGOs strive towards building and consolidating a civil peace by resisting the military Israeli occupation. They also try to raise public awareness about human rights issues being neglected by the elites both in Israel and the PA. Hence, they outline their practices according to an overarching human rights framework, which include exposing and documenting abuses against civil rights in the occupied territories, such as restrictions in freedom of movements, collective punishments, and violence. Several organisations are using large numbers of field workers who collect material and document testimonies about human rights abuses (for example B’Tselem and Machsom Watch). The vertical expectation gap is clearly visible in the sphere of security. The elite based peace process has been dominated and guided by a narrow state-centred notion of security whereas human security has been nearly absent on the political agenda. For instance, gender issues which are closely associated with human security have been excluded and hidden during the on-going peace process despite the fact that women in many ways are affected and bear the heavy burden of the persisting conflict (Hershkowitz, 2012, Saragusti, 2012). In 2001, Machsom Watch was formed by women against occupation and as a response to the repeated reports in the press about the extensive human right abuses of Palestinians crossing army and border police checkpoints.
Since then over 400 women, from the North to the South of the West Bank monitor and witness daily what take place, noting and publicising infringements on human rights.

Some of the human rights organisations tend to differ in regard to impartiality and the degree of action-oriented peace activities. The Israeli human rights organisation B’tselem stresses the need of impartiality in documentation and underlines that it does not weigh in on political matters, except to comment on their implications for human rights. In contrast, the Palestinian human rights organisation al-Haq emphasises the need not only to document human rights abuses, which contradict international law, but also to enforce the law by trying to prosecute and file cases against criminals.

As part of raising public awareness so-called peace tourism in the OPT are increasing in numbers. “Breaking the silence” is an organisation which provides such tours to Hebron where the military occupation is very present by the fact that 400 extreme Israeli-Jewish settlers reside and occupy the city center under Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) protection. The organisation was established by a group of veteran combatants who have served in the IDF since the start of the second intifada and the main driving force for this organisation is to counter the silence in Israeli society by exposing to the Israeli public the brute reality of every-day-life of occupation and to trigger public debate on the price for the occupation. It works both with documentation, primarily built on voluntary testimonies of IDF soldiers, but also with tours organised by former combatants who have served in the area. The aim of this tour is to allow an unmediated encounter with the daily reality of military occupation but also to share from the soldiers’ experience of having to face and control a civilian population on a daily basis, which illustrate the Israeli government’s policies enacted by the IDF (Shaul, 2011).

Another form of peace tourism within pre-1967 borders aims to raise public awareness of the Palestinian tragedy of 1948. Zochrot is one such organisation, which aim is to promote awareness of the Nakba (Bronstein, 2005:220). Zochrot organises tours of Israeli towns, which include taking displaced Palestinians back to the areas they fled or were expelled from in 1948 and afterwards. A key aim is to "Hebrewise the Nakba" by creating a space for it in the public domain of Israeli Jews. It thus tries to make the Nagba visible to Israelis. Hence, their main goal is not to visualise the occupation of 1967, but to highlight the Palestinian vulnerability ever since the 1948 War. They also put up signs of names of Arab villages that were abandoned in 1948 and try to influence decision makers to put the names of these villages on maps. In addition, they listen to and document testimonies of Palestinian refugees (Bronstein, 2012). In this way they have found a way to resist the master narratives of Zionism (Strömbom, 2010).

Most human rights organisations tend to cooperate horizontally both in the areas of documentation of visualising the implications of military occupation as well as in advocacy, spreading information to relevant decision makers, media channels, other international organisations and foreign administrations and diplomats (Refael, 2012, Ziv, 2012, Abd-el-Halim, 2012). However, groups like Machsom Watch have a double strategy; besides raising awareness of occupation, they also have a humanitarian aim that includes arguing with guards and soldiers, and trying to raise awareness of humanitarian problems at check-points. This work entails trying to call relevant staff in the army when human rights are violated, and to contact journalists in order to make them write about mal-conditions around the check-points.
This often has positive effects in the way that conditions at certain checkpoints are improved. A noted example is how activists helped to raise awareness of that there was no shade where people had to wait in line in order to get permission to pass through Kalandia checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah (Hershkowitz, 2012). After raising awareness of this, a “humanitarian” lane for women, children and elderly was installed, which provides shade for those who wait in line (UNISPAL, 2011). However, this humanitarian work has been criticised by other NGOs who see such actions as “humanising” occupation, which make it harder to see the effects of occupation as the occupier is behaving in seemingly humane ways. A representative from Machsom Watch sees this as problematic, but claims that her organisation tries to counter this critique by being overtly critical of the occupation per se, by issuing statements against it and through the spreading of films and documentation on human rights violations (Hershkowitz, 2012).

Humanitarian assistance is thus a fine balancing act and risk to “humanise” the occupation. Paradoxically, as pointed out by Ofer Neiman from Yesh Gvul, the work and activities of these HR organisations are important for Israel’s self-image as well as for domestic and international PR purposes and thus contribute to hide the more brutal realities of occupation. For instance, Hadas Ziv from Physicians for Human Rights (PfHR) illustrates how the Israeli authorities at times use examples from her organisation’s work. Every week PfHR enters the West Bank with a mobile clinic with Israeli physicians to assist the Palestinian population. This has been used by Israeli authorities for PR purposes: “look how good we are, we let the mobile clinic work in the Palestinian areas and we even assist in educating Palestinian physicians” (Ziv, 2012). She feels that this is co-optation that the organisation itself does not stand for. To counter this, PfHR tries to reach out with briefings, which directly or indirectly criticise the Israeli military occupation. For example, they schedule meetings with embassies and consulates on a regular basis where volunteers brief about their work and experience. They also have outreach programs targeting medical students, social workers and lawyers, trying to educate them to be aware of the humanitarian effects of occupation in their work (Ziv 2012). However, many of the peace activists express frustration in their advocacy work and there are numerous obstacles to effectively influence elite policymaking processes since there is only a scant minority in the Knesset today that prioritise peace on top of their political agenda. Yet, PfHR attempts to make personal appeals to members of Knesset and journalists who may be able to influence specific cases (Abd-el-Halim, 2012).

**Joint activities as peacebuilding**

Joint activities are often viewed as the cornerstone in peacebuilding since it is assumed to revise engrained negative enemy images, counter stereotyping and thereby enable trust, empathy and shared interests to develop. To counter the critique against the elite-based DOP signed between the Israeli government and the PLO in 1993 and to address the vertical peace gaps, extensive people-to-people programmes (P2P) were launched as part of the MEPP in the 1990s and were sponsored to large part by international donors. Peace projects coordinated by the Peres Center for Peace illustrate well the vast areas where joint activities have taken place, such as medicine, sports, agriculture, environment, business, education, youth, technology, the arts, training and capacity building, etc. (Stern, 2012). Yet, many of
these programmes resulted in failures since “people from both sides appeared to be more concerned about fulfilling their donors’ agenda rather than focusing on the stakes of those bi-communal activities” (Brown, et al 2008:17). Moreover, extensive critique has been directed against joint activities while the occupation is still in place. Dialogue groups on reconciliation have been seen as being premature and most of them collapsed with the second intifada. Joint cultural activities and sports events have been seen as an attempt to normalise an abnormal situation where one group lives under the occupation of another (Deeb, 2012).

Jerusalem Link is an illustrative case of the difficulties experienced of joint activities in the midst of surrounding and escalating violence. It was established in the early stages of the peace process in 1994 as an umbrella organisation between two women organisations, one Israeli and one Palestinian, focusing on peace, gender and empowerment. As gender issues and women have nearly been absent from the peace negotiations (Saragusti, 2012, Ikermawi, 2012) (with the exception of Tsipi Livni), the Jerusalem Link underlined the need of women to be central partners in the peace process, with active and equal participation in the decision-making and negotiations, in order to construct a just and viable peace. The aim was to set up shared political principles as a foundation for a cooperative model and co-existence between the two peoples. These principles outlined a joint vision of a just peace according to democracy, human rights, women leadership, and a two-state-solution, Jerusalem as the capital for two peoples, moral, legal, political and economic responsibility of Israel for the Palestinian refugees and a complete territorial withdrawal to pre-1967 borders. However, with the outbreak of the second intifada tensions grew within the organisation about the political stance (or lack thereof). After the Gaza war in 2009 Bat Shalom was unwilling to take a strong political stand on the Israeli actions in the Gaza war. The Palestinian Center for Women thus withdrew their partnership, which in turn meant that Bat Shalom no longer received funding from donors, as they had no Palestinian partner. Thus Bat Shalom had to close whereas the Jerusalem Center for women in contrast is still functioning (Ikermawi 2012).

Water has been another area viewed as suitable for joint peace activities since there is a strong interdependence between Israelis and the Palestinians on water resources. They share two groundwater basins: the Costal aquifer in the Gaza Strip, and the Mountain aquifer, which includes the Western Mountain basin, the Eastern Mountain basin and the north-eastern Mountain basin. Water has from the outset of the peace process been framed as a potential cataclysm for peace. For instance, a working group on water was part of the multilateral peace talks and the bilateral negotiations addressed the quest for water management (although not water rights) as part of the Oslo II. Such a discourse taps in to the functional/technological approach of spillover, which is understood as cooperation in low politics may spill over to high politics. Water has also been a favoured area of international funding and the organisation Friends of Earth Middle East (FoEME) has been able to ride on this kind of topical financial support. It was founded in 1994 on a platform of EcoPeace and environmental peacemaking. This is based on the principle that our common dependence on natural resources and a healthy environment facilitates cooperation between societies, and foster the establishment of peaceful cross-border societal linkages. Hence, Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli researchers began working to study environmental issues to develop a common vision, which they later used in their advocacy efforts to influence decision makers,
media and the general public within their own respective community, that is, Palestinian to Palestinian, Jordanian to Jordanian and Israeli to Israeli (Bromberg, 2012). However, in the end of the 1990s the organisation went through a turbulent change since its activities have been closely associated with the progress of the MEPP. Yet, in early 2001 it launched its new grass-root activity of “good water neighbours” with paired cross-border communities, which today has become the world largest grass-root environmental organisation.

Peace agents: outreach and influence?

Despite the fact that several peace NGOs work with the explicit aim of advocacy their limited success of impacting the elite level is striking. When trying to assess the discrepancy between peace efforts on the elite level and the work conducted by peace NGOs engaged in civil rights, there is quite a substantial rift. This is reflected in the lack of official support for bottom-up peacebuilding processes, but also with their lack of outreach to wider Israeli and Palestinian societies. Peace activism has had little, if any, influence and effect on public opinion and attitudes on both sides (Spinks 2009:27). While Eitan Bronstein, the head of Zochrot agrees with the claim to have had little influence when it comes to decision-makers, he still see that Israelis have become slightly more aware of the Naqba today, partly, but surely not solely, due to the work done by Zochrot. Outreach is also done through training of teachers to teach the Naqba. Zochrot has for example constructed a study guide on the Naqba, which has been distributed, to high schools and universities. Because of their focus on the Naqba, which is a question important for Palestinian identity, Zochrot have good cooperation with Palestinian organisations (Bronstein, 2012). For example, they do joint work with BADIL, which is a resource center for Palestinian residency and refugee rights that is mandated to defend and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees and internally displaced persons.

However, as the mainstream organisations are diminishing and shifting focus, the actual agents for peace today work on a lower level and are quite marginal in numbers. What seems to be left today is a plethora of peace NGOs, which has quite marginal impact on the peace process and broader sectors of civil society. Some of them, such as Isha l’Isha, argue that the limited impact is partly due to the fact that their activities are opposed from so many directions, which hinder the communication of their ideas to the broader public (Safran, 2012). Several organisations experience that their activities are delegitimised on a regular basis as authorities on both sides try to impinge their work. In Israel, there is as mentioned above, presently a tremendous problem with carrying out peace activities as an NGO because of what many NGOs experience as a “calculated onslaught” on leftist and human rights organisations (Ziv, 2012). This is done through the cutting of funding, but also through strong de-legitimation campaigns in the media and elsewhere. The onslaught comes mainly from organisations such as the NGO Monitor, Israel academia monitor and Im Tirtzu that are partly backed by the government and of many right-wing Knesset members. They constitute a new phenomenon in Israel - civil society organisations whose main activity are to monitor and try to assert control over other organisations. Their efforts seem to be directed at halting human rights and peace advocacy and keeping these organisations under strict regulation (Menuchin, 2010). One of the main things that these monitoring organisations have tried to prohibit is the
forwarding of ideas of universal jurisdiction, such as human rights. This has led to a precarious situation for human rights organisations, because if they follow this prohibition, it would be impossible for them to carry out their work. Therefore, it might be quite fair to say that these organisations are important, yet marginal, when it comes to promoting peace in civil terms. They might raise awareness, but have difficulties both in communicating their ideas upwards towards the elite, as well as to the broader public (Saragusti, 2012, Hershkowitz, 2012, Neiman, 2012). Hence, organisations on both the Israeli and the Palestinian side presently work under very difficult conditions. Some also say that they fear that funding for their activities might be cut off in the future. Some organisations such as Machsom Watch and the women’s organisation Isha l’Isha are built mostly on volunteer work, and obviously those organisations would not be as strongly affected by decreased funding. However, some organisations that require substantial funding in order to conduct their activities, like the Physicians for Human Rights would go completely defunct without funding (Ziv, 2012, Abd-el-Halim, 2012).

Another growing phenomenon that has severe effects on the peace NGOs to reach out with their work is the widespread peace fatigue, which has become prominent in both Israeli and Palestinian societies. Anat Saragusti (2012) poignantly describes the peace fatigue, as “there are so many peace plans on the shelf that the shelf is collapsing”. Hadas Ziv (2012) says that the previously so vocal peace society has now instead evolved into a silent majority, which wants to go on with their lives instead of focusing on the conflict. With the separation between the peoples and with the majority of the Palestinian population under the Palestinian Authority much fewer soldiers are stationed in the OT. The occupation has therefore become less visible to many civilian Israelis, which also can explain the movement from a society of peaceniks to a society of peace fatigue, silence and indifference (Levy, 2012). “The Israelis are just not interested in peace anymore” (Hershkowitz, 2012).

As other peace NGOs, FoEME experienced similar crisis with the collapsing peace process. The organisation was increasingly being condemned and attacked and was viewed by some on both sides as a fraud or conspiracy to maintain the status quo. Israeli-Palestinian cooperation was labelled collaboration, serving the interests of the other side. However, FoEME is a deviant and rare case in its capacity to reinvent the organisation by reconsidering its mandate in the midst of unprecedented violence (Bromberg, 2012). It quickly came to realise that medium and long-term interests were not sufficiently relevant in the midst of ever increasing violence and loss of hope and trust. Instead it was argued the organisation must now speak to the immediate concerns of the people with an action-oriented peacebuilding approach, which in the midst of violence is able to show how communities can and are presently able to benefit from the cooperative relations. Hence, in 2001 it launched its successful model of combining top-down approaches (research, lobby, advocacy on such issues as fair water accord) with bottom-up community-based work in the good water neighbourhood project, which is constantly expanding despite the fact that the peace process is frozen. Hence, it took a leading role in peacebuilding through grass root efforts, which through dialogue, confidence building and cooperation activities focused on actual cross border resources that could directly benefit people (Bromberg, 2012).

Palestinian peace NGOs are faced with a dramatically different reality from the Israeli peace NGOs. In a highly politicised society as the Palestinian one, resistance and not
cooperation is prioritised. Hence, peace activism is viewed as both naïve and unpatriotic in large sectors of Palestinian society (Kahanoff, et al, 2007:50). Moreover, Palestinian peace activists are frequently described as “the usual suspect,” a label of people who have turned peace activism and dialogues with the other side into their profession. This reflects the problem of recruitment and mobilization of peace among Palestinians.

Several Palestinian human rights organisations such as al-Haq, Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), and Adalah are unified in their work against human rights violations committed by the Israeli state. After the Oslo agreement, their work has also been directed toward the PA and after 2005, also toward Hamas in the Gaza strip. Marwan Jabarin, who is the director of al-Haq describes this as being a “bird with two wings”, one covering the actions by the Israeli state and the other human rights violations conducted by the Palestinian authorities (Jabarin, 2012). Samih Muhsin, from the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, talks about harassment by the PA when the Center has documented and disseminated reports, which criticise the Palestinian Authority. He says that harassments have worsened and even increased after the Hamas take-over in Gaza. This in turn makes the Palestinian human rights organisations under attack from two directions (Muhsin 2012). They are viewed with great suspicion from the Israeli government, which for example recently tried to put a travel ban on the president of al-Haq. At the same time, the PA does not like the fact that these human rights-organisations are criticising the elite, and therefore have tried to infringe on their activities. Sometimes this has been done brutally as well as quite haphazardly, as human rights activists several times have been imprisoned on diffuse grounds (Hassassian, 2006:75).

When it comes to criticising the PA, the Panorama Center, based in Gaza, Ramallah, and Jerusalem, try to voice criticism against how the PA relate to the refugee camps. Here is a strong criticism toward that the PA since the Palestinian refugees live under very bad conditions in refugee camps such as Jenin and Jabbaliyah. If the conditions in the camps improve, it is more difficult to make a case that these refugees must return, since they seemingly would have a better life if the malconditions were addressed. Paradoxically then, Panorama claims that the PA strategy has been to ignore the camps, something that they criticise strongly towards since they see it as leading to a very strong split between refugees and non-refugees within Palestinian society. There is an increased feeling of ghettoization and discrimination. Therefore the Panorama Center tries to create media campaigns in order to highlight the precarious humanitarian situation in the refugee camps (Deeb, 2012).

Power asymmetry and the problem with relationship building

The asymmetrical nature of the conflict exposes contrasting realities and conditions for Israelis and Palestinian to engage in peacebuilding. The unequal power structures generate very different sets of needs and agendas. Israelis are living in a relatively free, developed and organised society whereas the Palestinians are living under occupation in a highly politicised society in a slow and uneven process of social and economic development. As a result, there are huge gaps in regards to power and expectation from cooperative endeavours as well as discrepancy between different norms of behaviour. Israelis tend to be more interested in the process whereas the Palestinians expect concrete political results that will end the occupation (Kahanoff et al, 2007:31,52). In this regard the international donor community has expressed
little sensitivity and awareness of this reality discrepancy between Israeli and Palestinians, which is one major reason why several joint peace activities have failed. Anat Saragusti points out that there is a pervasive discourse of symmetry on the international levels. She claims that there is a strong disillusionment where the two parties are discussed as if they had equal opportunities and power resources (2012). Hence, the power asymmetry hinders in several ways the parties to build long-term stable and peaceful relationships.

First and most importantly cooperation and peacebuilding while the occupation is still in place is highly problematic. For many Palestinians, cooperation under these conditions is perceived as a threat to their cultural, national and religious integrity since it may create the appearance of peace while covering up the continued injustices (Spinks 2009:30). Yet, many of the peacebuilding efforts have been organised and framed as post-conflict activities when the reality still displays a continuation of the conflict. For instance, several Palestinians who have participated in dialogue forums with Israelis underline that despite the efforts to create equality in the interaction the external asymmetrical reality is so much stronger (Ikermawi, 2012). Hence, for many Palestinians one objective of peacebuilding encounters is to educate Israelis on Palestinians suffering under occupation.

Second, the asymmetry is also reflected in professional gaps and inequality of resources between the agencies, which tend to lead to a paternalistic approach by Israelis helping the weaker side (Ikermawi, 2012). The Israeli side is frequently the one providing expertise whereas the Palestinians tend to recruit officials, which generates differences in social and cultural codes of interaction. For instance, academics and experts may speak relatively freely whereas officials are much more restrained by social and political taboos (Ikermawi, 2012). These kinds of discrepancies in communication create a lot of frustration and misunderstandings.

Third, the asymmetry and the continuation of the conflict have generated a “stigma of normalisation” which challenges most of joint peace activities. The director for the Jerusalem Center for Women even claims that since they ended the cooperation with Bat Shalom, the Center has experienced positive reactions from Palestinian society. It is now perceived to be a more credible organisation and no longer stigmatised by cooperation with Israelis as before. Hence, the stigma of normalisation has meant that peace is difficult to “market” among the broader Palestinian society, which also leads to less horizontal cooperation, even with pro-peace and anti-occupation groups. However, the position of anti-normalisation can take many different stances towards joint peace activities with Israelis. Some reject them altogether, whereas others do not call for severing relations with Israeli solidarity groups that seem to be honest in cooperating with Palestinians in what they view as a shared struggle for justice and human rights (Salem, 2005).

Bringing back politics to peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is ultimately about politics, which include antagonistic processes and political power struggles. Yet, within the dominant liberal peacebuilding literature, there is a tendency to depoliticise and reframe strategies towards technical discourses. Many of the local peace NGOs which work we have assessed here, challenge that notion in their resistance toward the current status quo. However, through antagonistic processes in which dominant elites are
allowed to formulate political solution, the voices of the local peacebuilding actors have become silenced. Yet, as the analysis reveals, the politics is constantly present and points to the necessity of formulating and addressing political horizons in peacebuilding. However, this is paradoxically the major weakness of many peace NGOs, who through antagonistic processes become excluded from the political arena. Being excluded from participation on the official political scene as well as being delegitimized by the political elite, they are left with strategies of resistance, which may be a powerful strategy of countering power, but is far from taking part in the formulation of political platforms. One representative from the organisation PfHR describes differences in the strategies of NGOs and more activist groups respectively. As she sees it, most NGO work is directed toward reform, that is modifying existing policies rather than overthrowing them altogether. This work is often done through advocacy, briefings of material and reports. However, if we look at activist groups, such as Anarchists against the Wall, they often use demonstrations and have more revolutionary goals (Ziv, 2012). Hence, the activist groups (which are more loosely put together than the NGOs) are clearer when it comes to formulating political agendas. However, through the elite strategies of delegitimizing peace work, neither of them currently have the potential to actually influence policies.

Much of the reform-work is trying to come to terms with problems in the occupied territories and also work to make the occupation invisible. The main concern of those organisations is thus trying to reverse the occupation that took place in 1997, and often aimed toward the two-state solution. As mentioned above, this would be a peace based on ideas of separation between national groups and does not at all have to imply future coexistence. Some of these groups, even though working in a more traditional framework, still have resistance as their main strategy. An example here is Machsom Watch, which has as its major goal to be present and observe at military checkpoints in order to raise awareness of human rights violations. An underlying goal of this organisation is also to make visible and show the implications of occupation. However, even though the organisation does not have an official political stand when it comes to coexistence, some of the representatives that we interviewed are still sceptical of the two-state solution. A woman from Machsom Watch says that “the two state solution is a bluff” (Hershkowitz, 2012). She sees the development on the West Bank as creating a demographic reality, which creates a Greater Israel that will be impossible to divide in practice. She does not go as far as arguing for a binational state, but still see the two-state solution as an impossibility given the conditions on the ground.

The more radically oriented groups, such as the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement, Anarchists against the Wall, and Zochrot, have coexistence in a shared state as their goal, meaning that they directly or indirectly aim their efforts at the consequences in 1948. This is indeed a more revolutionary objective both because it is seen as an extremely radical policy in the Israeli context, but also because it would overthrow the whole peace discourse which has been dominant since 1967 onwards. Eitan Bronstein from Zochrot is convinced that peace will not happen without acknowledgement of what happened to the Palestinians in 1948. In his mind, this leads to the moral conclusion that the Palestinians, in one way or the other, must be given the right of return to their former lands.

Before, there has been a mutual desire among Israelis and Palestinians to separate in order to form separate entities in the future. This has mainly taken place through negotiation and
agreements to which both parties have approved. However, from the 1990s and onward a parallel trend has been visible and increasing. Israel has more and more started to take unilateral actions, which has increased physical separation. With the development of time, the temporary closures of territories, the building of the separation wall and the siege on Gaza after the unilateral disengagement has created a reality where Israelis and Palestinians have very little civil contact except from military check-points. Many peace activists see this as a devastating development, where everyday Israelis become less and less aware and concerned with occupation, and in which Palestinians only see Israelis as imperious militaries and never as fellow human beings (Pundak, 2012, Ziv, 2012, Hershkowitz, 2012, Neiman, 2012, Salem, 2012, Refael, 2012).

**Concluding remarks**

The overarching aim of this paper has been to dissect the *problematique* of peace gaps, both vertical and horizontal ones, and their implications on local peacebuilding. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we have strived to illuminate the conditions of local peace agents who are confronted with an extremely complex and difficult environment with little if any influence on pushing the peace agenda forward. On the expectation gap, there is a striking difference between the peace agendas of the Israeli government as well as the PA from those of the local peace NGOs. As the elites on both sides are paralysed in moving forward in the peace process they express suspicion, contempt and even hostility towards some of the local peacebuilding NGOs. Their agendas, outlooks and prospects for the future thus show striking differences. These organisations suffer from various de-legitimation campaigns and are further undermined in their work due to the political apathy and peace fatigue that both Israelis and Palestinians in general express and seriously inhibit peace mobilisation and communication. For example, a mass movement such as Peace Now has now decreased in influence and numbers and most of the contemporary peace activities are conducted within issue-specific and small-scale peacebuilding projects. Moreover, the physical separation makes Israelis less aware of the conflict (Neiman, 2012, Ziv, 2012), and Palestinians even more frustrated as it infringes on their freedom of movement. Hence, the physical separation has severe impact on the physical as well as psychological bordering between Israelis and Palestinian and has contributed to enlarge the rift between the two communities (Paz-Fuchs and Cohen-Lifshitz, 2012).

On the Israeli side, the development that influence the work in a most profound way is how “peacetalkers” are discredited (Saragusti, 2012) by right-wing organisations and at times by the Israeli government. This brings about immense gaps of communication as local peace organisations are hindered to communicate their resistance to the public sphere. Thus they are hindered from taking active part in decision-making processes regarding the conflict as well as from raising public awareness, which further contributes to the deadlock in peace negotiations. New legislation has been initiated, of which some has passed, such as the “Naqba Law” which prohibits official acts of mourning on Israel’s Independence Day (which is the same day when Palestinians mourn their loss of lands in 1948). The new laws, as they in addition have targeted NGOs working with human rights, have created an “atmosphere of intimidation” among NGOs and the public (Bronstein, 2012). Some of the Israeli NGOs that we interviewed feared that their work might be shut down as a result of the delegitimation
campaigns (Bronstein, 2012, Ziv, 2012, Neiman, 2012). On the Palestinian side, the biggest internal difficulty to overcome may be the stigma of normalisation, which has surfaced recently and has had severe implications on joint peace activities. Many Palestinian NGOs, working for peace as well as on human rights try hard to legitimise their work for the Palestinian public. Thus, anyone who participates in “joint efforts” for peace might be viewed as a traitor or as collaborating with the enemy (Hallward, 2009:542). Thus, in both Israel and Palestine, the ones who are allowed to communicate what peace should entail have to follow the master narratives of the government or the PA as dissenting voices are having increased difficulties when it comes to making themselves heard. The Israeli widespread peace fatigue together with the spreading Palestinian stance of anti-normalization thus also contribute to a vast communication gap between the peace NGOs and the public in both societies.

When it comes to identification gaps, the picture is less clear. Many of the NGOs still adhere to the two-state solution, which also has been the solution propagated in the elite negotiations. However, it seems that a number of activists that we have interviewed increasingly are seeing the two-state solution as an unrealisable idea, if not in principle than in practice. This leaves us with either a one-state solution or a remaining reality in which asymmetries are growing as Israel persist in their unilateral policies which brings about an even more powerless and desperate Palestinian population. Finally, on the question of power and asymmetry there seems to be a vast gap when it comes to the influence of the elite and the NGOs in peace building activities. As mentioned in the introduction, the international discourse has been one of symmetry where the vast power asymmetries, which are inherent in the conflict has remained unrecognised. The two-state solution can be seen as a partial answer, but that seems to be moving further away from the political horizon. As the peace NGOs are becoming discredited and marginalized, their ability to speak for the marginalized and for the occupied is diminishing. Many of the peace NGOs work on different issues and agendas. In joint activities Palestinians and Israelis come together to resist occupation and to enforce human rights but they also vary in their political articulation. However, one conclusion that we draw from the analysis conducted is the urgent need to bring in views from local peace NGOs into the official discourse on peace. Since the peace gaps are so vast, is is indeed necessary to try and create a platform where these discrepancies can be discussed. This cannot be done with a goal set for consensus, but rather through agonistic dialogue in which differences are allowed to coexist. That could bring about an agonistic politics of peacebuilding (Aggestam, 2012; Ramsbotham, 2010) where contending forces and views actually can coexist, no matter their differing points of view. Thus the current antagonisms, which limit and deadlock the current peace process could be renegotiated to include a political horizon. This seems to be even more urgent today when an increasing number of peace activists of different affiliations argue that facts on the ground are pushing us farther away from the two-state-solution.


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**Links to opinion polls:**
The information from the **Truman Institute Poll for July 2001** can be found here:
http://truman.huji.ac.il/poll-view.asp?id=35

The information from **PSR for July 2001** can be found here:

The information from the **Peace Index for July 2001** can be found here:
http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=111&monthname=July
aceindex.org/files/peaceindex2006_3_3.pdf

The **PSR** data for **March 2009** can be found here:

The **Truman Institute** summary for March 2009 can be found here:
http://truman.huji.ac.il/poll-view.asp?id=257

The **Peace Index .pdf** summary for March 2009 can be found here: